

The Geography of *The Border Legion*

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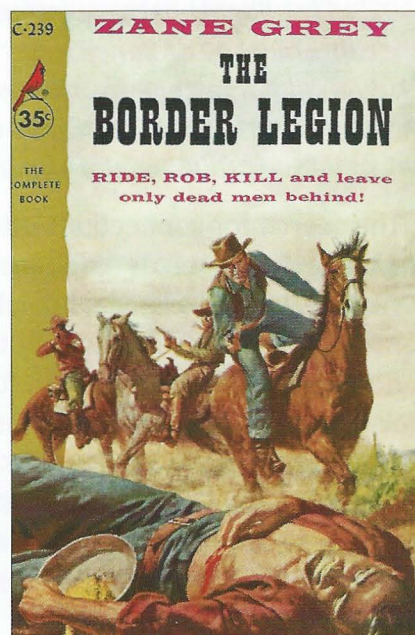
The Border Legion has a curious geography. Dr. Joe Wheeler states this book features “very little description of the topography or nature phenomena” (1975, p. 163), and he is right on target with this assessment. He goes on to note that “most Zane Grey biographers have claimed this one represents one of the few times in his life when he didn’t research his terrain for the setting.” Wheeler says he “once concurred” but now is “not so sure” because Grey could have studied the setting for the book on a 1915 cross-country trip to San Francisco.

I see little evidence that Grey visited the landscape described in *The Border Legion*. Whether the topic is terrain, vegetation, weather, or animal life, almost nothing specifically distinctive about the Northern Rockies appears in the book. Indeed, the canyons and mountains could just as easily be in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California or in the White Mountains of Arizona. This is not to suggest that Grey’s descriptions are inaccurate, but the prose is less geographically rich than the majority of his other Westerns.

Rather than reflecting Grey’s lifelong fascination with a landscape as in *The Rainbow Trail*, for example, this book is a character study of men crazed by power, lust, and gold. Arthur Kimball calls it “a full-scale captivity narrative” (1995, p. 113). Chuck Pfeiffer (1989) ranks it as one of his top ten books and notes the story is based on the infamous Henry Plummer of the Alder Creek (or Alder Gulch) gold rush in the Virginia City, MT area of southwestern Montana in 1863. Plummer formed a gang of ruthless thieves and killers who brutalized miners. In Grey’s fictionalization, Kells takes the role of Henry Plummer, and Gulden is based upon Plummer’s lieutenant, Boone Helm.

The Border Legion features four significant geographic settings: the foothills east of Hoadley, Idaho, where Joan Randle jilts Jim Cleve’s boyish professions of love but later is kidnapped by Jack Kells; the Lost Cañon cabin where Joan shoots Kells; Cabin Gulch, where Cleve joins Kells’ outlaw gang, the “Border Legion;” and Alder Creek, scene of the crazed gold rush and the worst of the deeds by the Border Legion. Creating some geographic intrigue is the fact that Hoadley is a fictional town name, and Lost Cañon and Cabin Gulch are generic names that could be located anywhere in the West. The biggest questions are what route the characters travel — and in which direction.

The action begins near Hoadley, Idaho, as Joan rides up a cedar ridge and sees ahead a “wild and looming mountain range” (p. 1; all pagination from the Grosset & Dunlap editions). The “glance around at the westering sun” (p. 9) implies that Joan is traveling eastward toward the mountains (as seen on the map at right). As Joan crosses the mountains she crosses the “border.” The only border of Idaho delimited by mountains is its eastern boundary with Montana that follows the massive Bitterroot Range, part of the Rockies.



The Pocket Book paperback cover illustration by Robert E. Schulz, 1957.

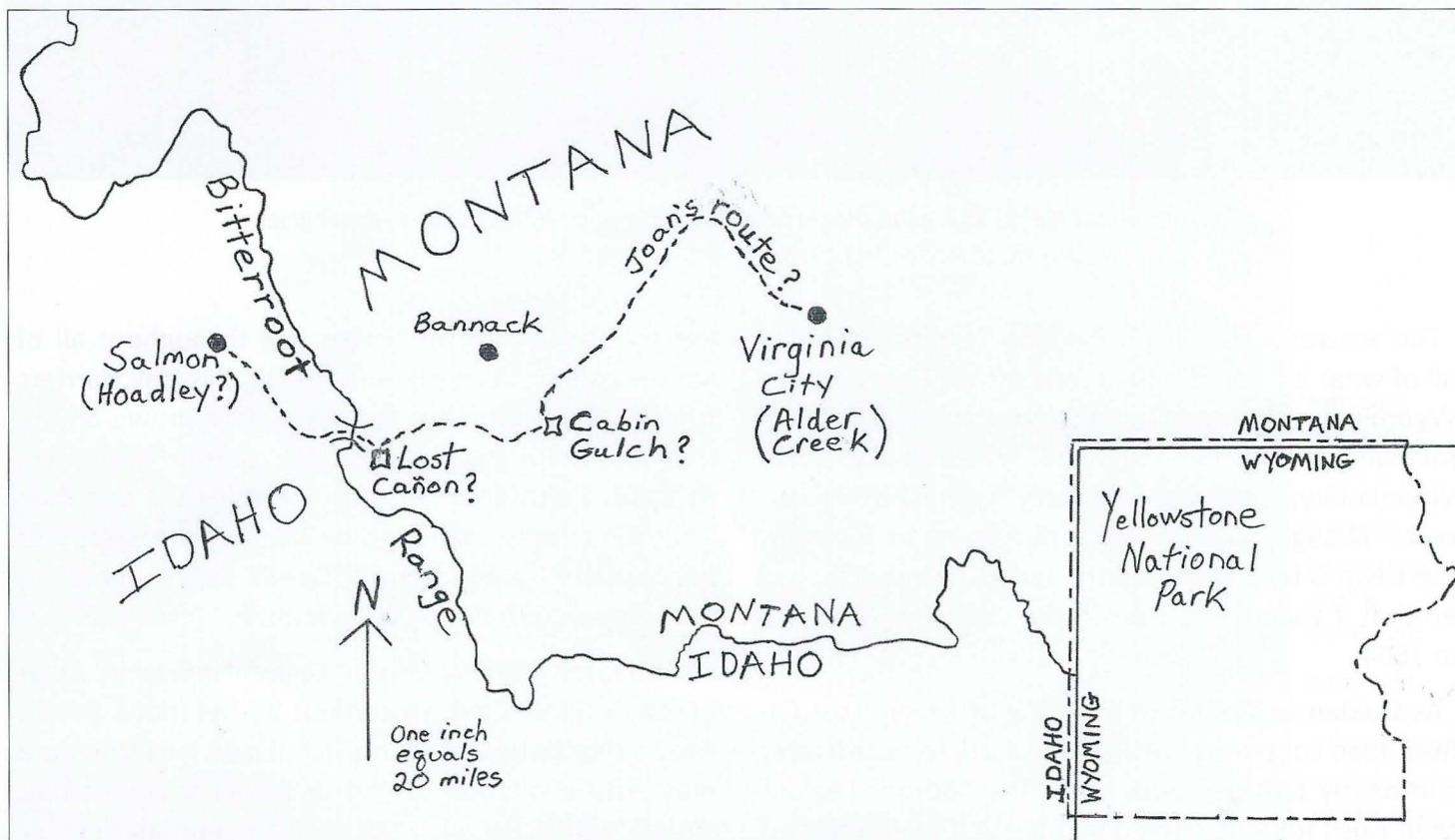
From the collection of Kevin Blake.

A likely model for Hoadley is the town of Salmon, Idaho, founded in 1866 as a result of nearby gold discoveries. From there the Bitterroot Range impressively soars to the east. It is easy to see why Grey describes the range as “gray-domed, glistening mountains, with their bold, black-fringed slopes” (p. 26). Salmon is only a few miles west of the border and from there a route leads over the range at Lemhi Pass. Coincidentally, Lemhi Pass is on the Continental Divide and was crossed by the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1805.

Another major geographic question is why the beginning of the book refers to “that southern border of Idaho” (p. 1). Salmon is not anywhere near the southern border of Idaho. However, the Salmon River, which for much of its course runs westward from the town of Salmon nearly to the Oregon border, is considered to be the dividing line between northern and southern Idaho. Thus, “that southern border of Idaho” could refer to a border in the southern half of the state. Just as likely it is simply a mistake never corrected by Grey or his publishers.

After kidnapping Joan, Kells and his gang ride nearly fifty miles to one of his hideouts, Lost Cañon, deep in the mountains amid balsam firs. Though native to the Lackawaxen, PA area where Grey lived while writing this book, *Abies balsamea* (balsam fir) does not grow in Idaho or Montana. *Abies grandis* (grand fir) does grow in the Bitterroots, though, and one of its common names is balsam fir. Still, there is nothing in the description of the setting to help pinpoint the location of Lost Cañon or to prove that Grey did (or did not) ever pass this way. Fifty miles from Hoadley (Salmon) would take travelers into present-day Montana; thus on my map I indicate that Lost Cañon is east of the border.

In Chapter 7, Kells is noted to be famous “. . . as the master bandit of the whole gold region of Idaho, Nevada, and northeastern California . . .” (p. 77). Why does Grey not include Montana? After all, on the same page Kells rules “from Bannack (Montana) to Lewiston (Idaho) and all along the border.” Indeed, Montana is barely mentioned by name in the book even though most of the action occurs there.



Map of the geography of The Border Legion. Cartography by Kevin Blake.



The Bitterroot Range, looking eastward from Salmon, Idaho. Photography by Kevin Blake.

The answer is that in 1863, Idaho Territory included all of what is now Montana (and most of present-day Wyoming). Montana Territory was created in 1864, following the tremendous gold strikes in places like Virginia City. Zane Grey certainly has his history correct. Though none of the action is set in Bannack, the town is frequently mentioned as it should be given that it was the first territorial capital of Montana in 1864.

As Gulden and more of the gang arrives in Lost Cañon, Joan continues nursing Kells back to health after she nearly fatally shoots him. The “Border Legion” then rides for a day and a half to their main camp at Cabin Gulch located somewhere between Lost Cañon and Alder Creek.

Impressive mountain ranges rise throughout all of southwestern Montana and are to this day barriers to easy movement, but the path I have drawn on the map was utilized as a stagecoach route in the 1870s. At Cabin Gulch, Joan sees Jim Cleve for the first time since Hoadley — although he doesn’t recognize her because she is dressed as “Dandy Dale,” complete with a mask to hide her real identity.

In Chapter 13, the Border Legion arrives in Alder Creek (Virginia City), to commit its nefarious deeds. Grey’s description of Joan’s initial ride into town is a masterful evocation of the despoliation of nature, shoddy construction, and almost inhuman toils of the miners. In terms of place description, this passage is the highlight of the book.

Jim Cleve and Joan, now secretly married and growing ever more fearful of Gulden's leers at Joan and the vigilante mayhem sweeping Alder Creek, decide to escape by taking the stage to Bannack (p. 313). Kells orders Gulden to hijack the stage, not realizing Jim and Joan are aboard (p. 323), and then Gulden menacingly watches over Jim and Joan on the long two-day ride to reunite with Kells at Cabin Gulch. The finale features the dispersal of the gold dust, the gambling which follows, and, finally, the memorable, bloody fight to the death between Kells and Gulden and the gang, after which Jim and Joan ride safely back to Hoadley.

Though *The Border Legion* has sparse geographical description, it is a memorable romantic drama featuring what Victor Carl Friesen calls "titanic evil forces" (2014, p. 52). The curiosities of its geography – which border, which mountains, which territories, and what route – provide additional mystery to the insightful descriptions of ruthless men in a roaring gold camp.

If you want to visit this beautiful terrain, the route that Joan likely traveled back-and-forth between Salmon and Virginia City is easily drivable today (during the summer) on paved highways and a good gravel road over Lemhi Pass.

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Pfeiffer, Charles G. 1989. *So You Want to Read Zane Grey and Don't Know Where to Start*. Columbia (SC): By the Author.

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Bannack, Montana is today a well-preserved ghost town and a state park.

Historical photos of Virginia City look similar to this view.

Photography by Kevin Blake.